An Assessment of Brand Image Gains & Losses after Changing Controversial Native American Marks: The Case of the Cleveland Indians Dropping Chief Wahoo

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One of an organization's most valuable assets is its brand, and, if managed correctly, it will have a direct impact upon image, attitude and identification. Brand image is critical to organizational success. Sport organizations strive to build relationships with their fans because brand and team identification can lead to long term success (Funk & James, 2001). There has been controversy about the use of Native American names, logos, and mascots related to sport brands (Shank & Lyberger, 2015). Professional sport franchises continue to use Native American mascots and nicknames, despite intense opposition from certain groups, calls for legislation to ban their use, and research demonstrating a negative impact on Native Americans (Fryberg, et. al., 2008). Studies have found that their use is not positive or ethical, denies humanity, and presents Native Americans as existing only in the past, as a single, monolithic people (Merskin, 2001).

Much research on Native American names, symbols, mascots, and logos has been from a sociological perspective (e.g., commodified racism, stereotypes to the maintenance of colonial ideologies), or has focused on CSR activities to increase brand image/equity. No studies have been conducted on the organizational ethical and social transgression framework, nor examined Native American logos in franchises’ brand image gains and losses framework (Grappi, Romani, & Bagozzi, 2013). This study examined image and equity, and sought to assess fans' opinion regarding the Cleveland Indians decision to abandon the Chief Wahoo logo. Fans' consumption intentions (attending events, watching games on TV, team online activity, SNS activity, and merchandise purchase) were assessed.

Qualtrics data pool was used to collect data from Indians fans. Data (N=568) were collected at two different time points: before (n = 284) and after the abandonment (n = 284). Confirmatory factor analysis and multi-group SEM were conducted. All model fit indices were acceptable (Kline, 2011). Construct validity was examined through both convergent validity and discriminant validity, and was found acceptable (Hair et al. 2010). Multi-group SEM was conducted to test whether brand image, equity, ethical and social transgression, team identification, attachment to Chief Wahoo, and consumption intentions changed after the abandonment. After the change, fans' attachment did not significantly predict brand image. Using Chin's (2004) procedure, the path coefficient level differences between pre and post were examined. The path coefficient after removal from Indians brand image to the perceived brand equity decreased, but, there was no decrease in game attendance intention and online activity participation intention. Brand image's path coefficients to TV watching intention, SNS participation intention, and merchandise purchase intention increased significantly.

Franchises using the Native American marks often encounter brand sensitivity issues, study findings suggest that perceived brand equity may decrease but, fans will still attend games and participate in online activities as before. Furthermore, the enhanced brand image outcomes may even increase viewing, SNS participation, and merchandise purchase intention which will benefit the organizations despite removing the Native American mark/logo.